The Eighth Commandment

Exodus 20:15

Study

This chapter examines the Eighth Commandment, "You shall not steal" (Exodus 20:15), exploring its theological foundations, practical applications, and continuing relevance for contemporary Christian life. The commandment presupposes the legitimacy of private property, a principle rooted in creation itself and affirmed throughout both Testaments. The study demonstrates that theft encompasses far more than outright stealing, including dishonest labor practices, business deception, unpaid debts, and even the misappropriation of reputation and time.

At the heart of theft lies covetousness, a failure to trust in God's provision that our consumer culture actively cultivates. However, the commandment is not just prohibitive. It also calls believers to positive duties, including honest labor, contentment in God's providential provision, and generous sharing with those in need. Drawing on texts such as Ephesians 4:28, the study shows how the gospel transforms thieves into generous workers who labor not merely for personal gain but to help those in need. We conclude with practical applications for believers, emphasizing the stewardship principle that all we have ultimately belongs to God, and challenging readers to learn contentment, integrity in all dealings, and to use their resources to serve their neighbors in need and advance God's kingdom.

The Foundation of Property Rights

The commandment "You shall not steal" presupposes the legitimacy of private property. If there were no such thing as rightful ownership, there could be no such thing as theft. As R.C. Sproul observed in his study on the Eighth Commandment, "This commandment is irrelevant unless the Lord has established a right to private property. I can steal from someone else only if that someone has belongings that are rightfully his. If everything is owned in common, I am not stealing from you when I take something that you claim as your own because I am simply

claiming my share of what we own in common. Consequently, the eighth commandment assumes that human beings can lawfully own things that belong specifically to them."[1]

By forbidding theft, God affirms that individuals have a right to own property and that this right must be respected by others. This principle is found throughout Scripture and forms the foundation of a just and orderly society.

The right to private property is rooted in creation itself. When God created Adam and Eve, He gave them dominion over the earth and its resources.[2] They were to work the garden, cultivate it, and enjoy its fruits. This work and the fruit of that work belonged to them by God's design. When sin entered the world, it corrupted humanity's relationship with property, leading to greed, envy, and theft. Yet the principle of ownership remained, and God's law continued to protect it.

Throughout the Old Testament, we see God's concern for the protection of property. The law made provision for restitution when property was stolen or damaged. Exodus 22:1 states, "If a man steals an ox or a sheep, and kills it or sells it, he shall repay five oxen for an ox, and four sheep for a sheep." This principle of restitution served both to compensate the victim and to deter theft. The penalty was not merely symbolic but designed to restore what was lost and to punish the wrongdoer appropriately.

The New Testament also affirms the right to private property. When Ananias and Sapphira sold their property, the apostle Peter made it clear that the property was theirs to keep or to give as they chose (Acts 5:4). The sin was not in keeping the property but in lying about what they had given. The early church's practice of sharing possessions was voluntary, not mandatory, demonstrating that private ownership remained a legitimate and protected right even among believers.

Private property is essential for human flourishing. It allows individuals to provide for themselves and their families, to plan for the future, and to use their resources in ways that honor God. It also provides the means for generosity and charity. We cannot give what we do not own.

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[1] R. C. Sproul, "The Eighth Commandment," Ligonier Ministries, accessed on 2/17/2026, https://learn.ligonier.org/devotionals/the-eighth-commandment.
[2] Genesis 1:28.

The Bible commends those who work hard, save wisely, and use their resources to help others. All of this depends on the recognition that individuals have a right to own and control property.

What Constitutes Theft?

Theft is not limited to breaking into someone's home or picking someone's pocket. It includes any act by which we take what belongs to another person without their consent. This can occur in many ways, some of which are socially acceptable or even legal but remain morally wrong in God's sight. The Heidelberg Catechism wisely observes that God forbids "not only outright theft and robbery, punishable by law," but also includes "all scheming and swindling in order to get our neighbor's goods for ourselves, whether by force or means that appear legitimate."[3]

One common form of theft is failing to give an honest day's work for an honest day's pay. An employee who wastes time, neglects duties, or uses company resources for personal benefit is stealing from the employer. Similarly, an employer who withholds wages, demands excessive hours without fair compensation, or exploits workers is guilty of theft. James 5:4 pronounces judgment on such employers: "Behold, the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, are crying out against you, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts."

Dishonesty in business is another form of theft. Proverbs 11:1 states, "A false balance is an abomination to the Lord, but a just weight is his delight." In ancient times, merchants would sometimes use dishonest weights and measures to cheat their customers. Today, this might take the form of false advertising, misrepresenting a product's quality, or charging inflated prices for inferior goods. Any deception that results in financial gain at another's expense is theft.

Failure to repay debts also violates this commandment. Psalm 37:21 says, "The wicked borrows but does not pay back, but the righteous is generous and gives." When we borrow money or goods, we enter into an agreement to return them. To fail to do so, whether through neglect or deliberate refusal, is to take what does not belong to us. While circumstances may sometimes make repayment difficult, the righteous person will make every effort to fulfill their obligations.

[3] *The Heidelberg Catechism*, Question 110, in *Ecumenical Creeds and Reformed Confessions* (Grand Rapids: CRC Publications, 1988), 73.

Shoplifting, fraud, embezzlement, and burglary are obvious forms of theft, but there are subtler violations as well. Failing to return something we have borrowed, keeping money that was given to us by mistake, or taking advantage of someone's ignorance or vulnerability all constitute theft. Even accepting government assistance for which we do not qualify, or evading taxes we rightfully owe, can be forms of theft.

The principle extends beyond material possessions. We can steal someone's reputation through slander or gossip. We can steal someone's time by wasting it unnecessarily. We can steal credit for work that someone else has done. In all these ways and more, we violate the spirit of the Eighth Commandment.

The Root of Theft: Covetousness

At the heart of theft is covetousness, the desire for what belongs to someone else. The Tenth Commandment, "You shall not covet," addresses the internal sin that often leads to the external act of stealing. Before a person steals, they typically desire what another person has. John Calvin wisely observed that under the prohibition of theft, God "comprehends all kinds of wicked acts of defrauding and circumventing by which we hunt after" our neighbor's goods, for "the murder which the soul commits is wrath and hatred; the theft, covetousness and avarice."[4] We should note how the commandments overlap. For example, coveting leads to stealing.

Covetousness is closely related to discontent. When we are not satisfied with what God has provided, we begin to look at what others have and wish it were ours. This is a failure to trust in God's goodness and provision. Hebrews 13:5 instructs, "Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have, for he has said, 'I will never leave you nor forsake you.'" Contentment is the solution to covetousness. When we trust that God will provide for our needs and are grateful for what we have, we are far less likely to be tempted to take what belongs to another.

Our consumer-based culture breeds covetousness at every turn. Advertising is designed to create dissatisfaction with what we have and to convince us that we need the latest product, the newest model, or the upgraded version. In so many ads, contentment is redefined as possession: peace

[4] Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.8.39–40, 45.

and satisfaction appear only once the product is acquired, implying that contentment is always just one more purchase away. For instance, I recently saw an advertisement from the watchmaker Rolex. The ad shows a scuba diver hesitating before diving. He is quite nervous, as he has never dived as deep as he is about to. After his dive, he is seen triumphantly smiling as he conquers his fear of deep water. Along with his big smile, we see a shiny new Rolex watch gleaming on his wrist. It appears that this is just what is needed to go from ordinary anxiety to elite mastery. The lesson is obvious! This ad teaches that buying a Rolex produces fulfillment. His dreams have come true! Or so the ad would have you believe.

Another way our culture produces discontent is through the internet and social media. It allows us to constantly compare our lives with others', often leading to envy and discontent. Many see others' homes, cars, vacations, and lifestyles, and begin to believe we deserve the same, even if we have not earned them or cannot afford them. What Paul wrote to the Corinthians speaks with equal force in our own consumer age. In 2 Corinthians 4:4, he reminds us. "In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God." Make no mistake, Satan, the enemy of our souls, works tirelessly to make the things of this world attractive to all of us!

True contentment flows from finding our deepest joy in God himself. Truly, the person who has found this has found the greatest treasure of all. The prayer in the Book of Proverbs by Agur is one of the clearest expressions of contentment in all of wisdom literature, indeed of the Word of God. Writing in Proverbs 30:8-9, he says, "Give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with the food that is needful for me, lest I be full and deny you and say, 'Who is the Lord?' or lest I be poor and steal and profane the name of my God." Another wonderful example is Psalm 23:1, "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want." This is one of the most beloved contentment verses in all of Scripture. This is finding great satisfaction in God's sufficiency as the Good Shepherd.[5]

The person who is discontented often has a mindset that can lead to financial irresponsibility, as individuals incur debt to acquire items they do not need. It can also lead to outright theft when people feel entitled to what others have worked to obtain. The solution is not to ignore others' prosperity but to fix our eyes on Christ and find our satisfaction in Him. Philippians 4:11-12

[5] John 10:14

records Paul's testimony: "I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need." Paul's contentment was not based on his circumstances but on his relationship with Christ.

The Positive Duty: Honest Labor and Generosity

The Eighth Commandment is not merely a prohibition against theft but also a call to honest labor and generosity. Paul makes this clear in Ephesians 4:28, "Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need." This verse contains three important principles: cease from stealing, engage in honest work, and be generous toward others.

Those who have stolen must stop. Repentance involves a complete turning away from sin. It is not enough to feel sorry for past wrongs or to promise to do better in the future. True repentance means ceasing the sinful behavior and making restitution where possible. Zacchaeus, the tax collector who encountered Jesus, demonstrated this kind of repentance. He declared, "Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor. And if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold" (Luke 19:8). His repentance was genuine because it led to concrete action.

We are also called to engage in honest work. God designed human beings to work, and labor is a gift from Him. In fact, labor is considered an ordinance of creation.[6] Even before the fall, Adam was given the task of working and keeping the garden (Genesis 2:15). Work gives us purpose, provides for our needs, and allows us to contribute to society. Idleness and laziness are condemned in Scripture. Proverbs 6:6,11 warns, "Go to the ant, O sluggard; consider her ways, and be wise... poverty will come upon you like a robber, and want like an armed man."

Honest work means more than simply being employed. It means working diligently, producing quality results, and treating employers, employees, and customers with integrity. Colossians 3:23 instructs, "Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men." When we view our work as service to Christ, it transforms our attitude and our performance. We are no longer

[6] Creation ordinances are God's rules and practices set up at the world's beginning, woven into human life and society before the sin of Adam and Eve. They are not laws or ordinances that were meant to end in due time. The Creator established them for the benefit of mankind. These ordinances are marriage and procreation, dominion and stewardship, labor, and the Sabbath. Some theologians also include the sanctity of human life.

working merely to earn a paycheck but to glorify God. Whether we are well-paid professionals or flipping burgers at Burger King, we are called to work as well as we can and in a manner that honors the Lord Jesus Christ.

We are to be generous toward those in need. The purpose of honest labor is not merely to accumulate wealth for ourselves but to have resources to share with others. This reflects the character of God, who is the ultimate giver. Second Corinthians 9:6-7 teaches, "Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver." As God has blessed us so abundantly, we should be a blessing to others and give to the work of the kingdom of God.

Generosity is not limited to giving money. We can be generous with our time, our skills, and our resources. We can help a neighbor in need, support a struggling family, or contribute to the church's work. The early church in Acts provides a wonderful example of generosity: "There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need" (Acts 4:34-35). While this level of communal sharing is not required of all believers, the principle of generosity should be a part of every Christian's life.

Application for Today

How should we live in light of the Eighth Commandment? First, we need to examine our own hearts and lives to see if we have broken this commandment in thought or action. Have we taken what doesn’t belong to us? Have we been dishonest in our business dealings? Have we failed to give our employer a full day's work? With the rise of remote work enabled by technology, many now work from home. While this is a great benefit, it also requires caution and care to make sure that an employer gets a full day’s work. Have we neglected to pay our debts? This is very common today, with many people accumulating credit card debt and taking out questionable loans, only to find later they cannot make the payments.

We also must guard against covetousness by cultivating contentment. This begins with gratitude for what God has already given us. First Timothy 6:6,8 reminds us, "Godliness with contentment is great gain... if we have food and clothing, with these we will be content." We must also resist

the constant pressure of advertising and social comparison that seeks to make us dissatisfied with our lives.

Additionally, we must commit ourselves to honest labor. Whatever our vocation, we should approach our work with diligence, integrity, and a desire to serve Christ. We should be known as people who can be trusted, who keep their word, and who deal fairly with others. This kind of reputation is more valuable than riches. Proverbs 22:1 says, "A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches, and favor is better than silver or gold."

Finally, we must remember that all we have ultimately belongs to God. We are stewards, not owners, of the resources He has entrusted to us. Psalm 24:1 declares, "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein." If we truly believe and understand this truth, it changes how we view property, work, and wealth. We no longer cling to our possessions but hold them with an open hand, ready to use them for God's glory and the good of others.

Conclusion

The Eighth Commandment calls us to respect others' property, work honestly, and be generous with what God has given us. It exposes the sin of covetousness and calls us to contentment in Christ. In a world marked by greed, dishonesty, and theft, God's people are to stand out as examples of integrity and generosity. This in itself is a wonderful witness to the grace of God in our lives. May we honor this commandment not merely by avoiding theft, but by actively pursuing righteousness in all our dealings, trusting that God will provide for our needs and that we will use our resources to bless others and advance His kingdom.

"I long for your salvation, O LORD, and your law is my delight" (Psalm 119:174).